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ABSTRACT

Traditional festivals and customs of the Chinese people are described in this publication which can be used with secondary level students. In the margins of the text are numbers which indicate slides and cultural objects that relate to the text. The text, however, can be used without the slides and objects. The following festivals are described: Chinese New Year (the most widely celebrated festival which falls around the end of January); Lion Dances and Roasted Pork (performed for many occasions e.g., at the grand openings of a new business); Ching Ming or Remembrance of Ancestors Day (people visit the graves of relatives and make offerings to them; falls on the 106th day after the winter solstice); Dragon Boat Festival (also known as Poet's Day, it commemorates the death of the poet Chu Yuan); Hungry Ghosts Festival (ceremony entails making offerings to the ghosts of those who died in poverty or without family); Mid-Autumn or Moon Festival (next to the New Year, Moon Festival is the most popular of Chinese festivals; takes place outside at night so that people can admire the moon); Double Tenth (marks the anniversary of the start of the Revolution of 1911); May Day (Communist Labor day); October First (independence day). Also described are customs regarding children, marriage, funerals, homes, taking meals, and tea. (Author/RM)

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Chinese Festivals and Customs

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1980

SO 013 765

CHINESE FESTIVALS AND CUSTOMS

In a country as old and as large as China, there are innumerable regional, religious, and historical differences. Furthermore, with twentieth century politics and international exchanges tradition has been questioned and sometimes altered. The main attempt here, however, is to take a look at images that are distinctively Chinese; therefore our view will be directed toward tradition, to festivals and customs that were passed on through the centuries.

The major festivals cited are traditional holidays the dates of which are figured on the Chinese Lunar Calendar, which predates the Western Calendar's first year AD by 2698 years. 1980 is the year 4678.

*

Visual aids: The numbers in the right-hand margin indicate slides and cultural objects that relate to the text. Numbers with a square around them, [1], indicate slides. Numbers with a circle around them, (1), indicate a cultural object. A full index to these numbers is at the end of the text.

Chinese New Year

New Year is the most widely celebrated of all festivals in Chinese communities around the world. The New Year usually falls around the end of January, on the Western Calendar. For China, an agricultural society, it comes at a convenient time; there is a lull in field work. While waiting for the spring harvest, New Year brings a break in the chill and monotony of winter. Presents are not exchanged, yet the anticipation of the New Year celebrations builds up weeks in advance. Large meals are planned, and families with only one pig will probably choose this as the time to eat it.

About ten days before the New Year households and merchants begin sweeping away the old year by cleaning out their homes and shops. Within a few days street fairs start where flowers, and posters are sold. Artists paint new poems for people, using gold ink on bright red paper. Large branches of peach blossoms are bought for decoration in the home, not unlike the custom of Christmas trees in the U.S.A.. The peach blooms in the winter. Historically the wood of the peach was believed to ward off evil spirits and good luck charms were carved out of it. The couplets pasted at the doorways were sometimes called peach-charms, and New Year is the time to change them. They wish for good luck, health, and happiness as well as ward off evil spirits. Fire crackers will be exploding throughout the holidays, scaring away evil and ringing in joy.

On New Year's Eve family members gather together to welcome the opening of the year. Bowls of melon seeds, peanuts,

and preserved fruits are set out for nibbling. They signify good fortune, long life, and happiness. New Year's Day is a time for worshipping ancestors and deities, and for visiting close friends and relatives. Everyone wears new clothes to symbolize throwing off the old, leaving the past and any misfortune it may have brought. The day is spent drinking, eating, and gambling. Married couples pass out red envelopes to the children and their younger, unmarried relatives and friends. The envelopes contain 'good-luck money'. It is the favorite holiday of children. With special foods, visiting and decorations, everything is exciting. (3)

The first fifteen days of the New Year each have specific celebrations. The second day, "Kai Nian" (Opening of the year), again is a day for visiting friends and relatives. Traditionally this is the day when a boss politely dismisses unwanted workers. Custom also has it that the employer pays a bonus to employees, which in the past was equal to a month's pay. The third day is labelled "Squabble Day". It was believed if people met on this day that quarrels would follow. Thus families refrain from going out or making visits.

The fourth day is set aside for welcoming back the Kitchen God, who went to Heaven over the New Year in order to make a report on the activities of the family during the previous year. Cooks are not supposed to lift a knife at this time, and leftovers are eaten. A new poster of the Kitchen God will be pasted up in the kitchen. Also, married women are expected to visit their parents on this day. The fifth day is known as the "Day of the God of Wealth" and people rise early to welcome the [3]

god in hopes that he will bring them good fortune in the coming year.

The seventh day is called "All People's Day". It is the common birthday of everyone. Congee, a rice porridge, is prepared and served with seven types of vegetables. The following days were traditionally various lantern celebrations. At one for example, temples held lantern auctions. Lanterns decorated with the characters for "Birth", "Dignity", and "Longevity" were sold; and those who had grown wealthy, or acheived prominence in public life were expected to make offerings and thank the deities. People over fifty hung lanterns in the ancestral temples in graditude for their long lives. Fathers who had prayed for and received sons, bought "Lotus" lanterns, which held lotus seeds and lettuce inside. The fifteenth day into the New Year was the traditional, official end of the festivities. (19)

Throughout the holiday period Chinese cities and communities are a bustle of activity. Even if families do not rigidly follow all traditional ceremonies, the New Year is still the celebration of hope and joy, with the family and friends gathering together. Lion Dances are performed in the streets with bands of gong and drum players; there are parades and demonstrations; and the sound and smell of fire crackers permeate the air. The common greeting is made with the right hand forming a fist and the left hand covering it (the fist, the sign of violence, is nullified by the open left hand which covers it.), at the same time saying, "Gung hei fat choi! "*, or "May your New Year be prosperous!". [4] (14) (17) (2)

*Cantonese is "Gung hei fat choi", Mandarin is "Gung hsi fa tsai".

Lion Dances and Roasted Pork

Lion Dances are performed for innumerable occassions. Children grow up playing with lion-head masks and drums. The masks are brightly painted and have furry manes attached. When a dancer dons a great lion-head mask, a train falls over his back keeping his identity a mystery unless he passes the mask over to another dancer. Bands of gong, cymbal, and drum players parade through the streets with the lion. Though the lion is commonly a single dancer, on more extravagent occassions the costume will cover two dancers creating a four-legged lion.

Grand openings of new businesses are among the occassions for a Lion Dance. A new restaurant may be opening, for example. Friends will have sent the new proprietor potted plants decorated with red ribbons. The plants line the entrance way of the shop, while out in the street fire crackers start going off, and the Lion Dance begins. As the lion dances in front of the store, evil spirits are frightened away. At the same time the whole event serves as a public announcement that the new business is indeed opened.

Dragon Dances are not as common as Lion Dances. Dragons are so long that they do not dance through the streets as do lions, rather they dance in one open area. The dragon-head is made in a similar fashion to the lion's, but it also has two horns and its train covers as many as ten to twenty dancers. Traditionally guilds or family clans had their own groups of dancers and musicians who would perform. Whereas nowadays, schools and clubs also organize dance groups.

Roasted Pork

Many religious dates entail making offerings to certain gods or the family ancestors. Extra incense will be lit and foods set out at the door. More important festivals may involve fasting; which in the Chinese sense of the word might mean rather: no eating of meat. Special do-fu (beancurd) cakes are eaten during the days of the fast. At the same time, whole pigs are roasted. The pigs are decorated and laid on a red alter, and then carried through the streets. Lion dancers and bands may also join the procession. The pig is an offering to the ancestors and deities. However, the Chinese people have experienced famine enough in their history so as to be very practical about offerings to the gods. During the days following the fast, the roasted pigs are cut up and sold. It is enough that the ancestors have seen the display; the gods and ancestors are appeased and the living do not go hungry.

[7]

Ching Ming

Innumerable auspicious days fill the Chinese Calendar. On many, offerings of food and incense are set outside doorways for the gods and ancestors. But on no day is the homage paid to the ancestors more elaborate than on Ching Ming Festival. The custom is that "Remembrance of Ancestors Day", or Ching Ming, falls on the 106th day after the winter solstice. At that time people are to visit the graves of relatives, clean them, and make offerings to them. The practice dates back at least to Han Dynasty times(206BC-220 AD), when adoration of tombs and temples was promoted. If graves are too far away, it is considered permissible to hold ceremonies at home or in the countryside.

Those who do visit the gravesites take such foodstuffs as fruits, dyed bright pink buns, meats, and rice. They also take incense (joss sticks) and paper offerings. The most common paper offering is paper money called "hell notes". They are arranged around the foods to bribe away evil spirits and ghosts. Other offerings are made much the same as kites, that is light bamboo or balsa wood frames are covered with thin, painted tissue paper. The paper offerings are created in shops that specialize in paper products and one can buy clothes, boats and cars and houses. These elaborate offerings are usually burned at the grave. More commonly they are seen at funerals than at Ching Ming Day. (See Funerals).

Dragon Boat Festival

Dragon Boat Festival is held on the Fifth Day of the Fifth Month. It is also known as "Poet's Day", as it commemorates the death of the poet Chu Yuan, who lived several centuries before Christ, in Hunan Province. Chu Yuan threw himself into the Mi Lo River in protest over decadence in the government. Legend has it that the people rowed boats out to try and save Chu Yuan, thus giving inspiration for present-day Dragon Boats. They searched in vain for his body. Fearing that fish would eat Chu Yuan's body, the people threw seet rice into the water hoping to divert hungry fish.

Nowadays, boatmen hold races in Dragon Boats which are long, narrow, wooden boats with a carved dragon's head on the bow. Twenty oarsmen row to the beat of a drummer, racing, symbolizing the attempts to save Chu Yuan. The Dragon Boat races held in Hong Kong attract boat teams from all over the world. [9] [10]

During the week of Dragon Boat Festival, households and restaurants prepare "jung", a kind of Chinese tamale. The "jung" represents the rice the people threw to the fish centuries ago. They consist of sticky rice mixed with either sweet beans or meats and vegetables, which is then wrapped in taro leaves, held with string and steamed.

Hungry Ghosts

The fifteenth day of the Seventh Moon is the Hungry Ghosts, or Wandering Ghosts, Festival. Some say that the festival began because the Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty (502 AD-557 AD) dreamed that he was to organize rites for the veneration of the dead. The ceremony entails making offerings to the ghosts of those who died in poverty or without family. It is believed that they died leaving no one behind to bury them properly or to care for their gravesites. Customary ritual includes setting out foods, burning incense and paper offerings in the evening soon after dark, however, the ashes of paper offerings and money smoulder all through the day. The purpose of the Hungry Ghost Festival is to appease the ghosts in the hope that they do not harass ones ancestors, or haunt the living. Believers also go to Buddhist or Taoist temples where they give earthly money to monks in exchange for their spiritual guidance.

Mid-Autumn or Moon Festival

Mid-Autumn Festival falls on the fifteenth day of the Eighth Moon, when the moon is full. Legend has it that during the Tang Dynasty, Hsuan Tsung and his concubine Yang Yu-huan found great pleasure in contemplating the moon, thus giving popularity to "moon-watching". Thus the Mid-Autumn Festival takes place outside at night so that people can admire the moon. Children make or buy lovely paper lanterns to carry about with them. Mooncakes, a rich pastry, are made especially for this holiday and given to friends and relatives.

As dusk draws near Dragon Dances applaud the approaching full moon. The first candles are lit as the moon-gazers go outside. Darkness sets in but the warm glow from lanterns, like personal moons, fill parks, Gardens twinkle like fairylands, aglow with the delicate lights. Next to the New Year, Moon Festival is the most popular and widely celebrated of Chinese festivals.

Another legend related to Moon Festival took place after Mongols had invaded China, (Yuan Dyn. 1260-1368 AD). Secretly plotting to over throw them, the Chinese communicated their plans by concealing them in cakes. The Chinese were to invite the Mongols to their homes for Mid-Autumn Festival, but when the moon was full the Mongols would be assassinated by the Chinese hosts. The plot was said to be successful and marked the beginning of the Ming Dynasty.

Modern Holidays

Those holidays celebrated on dates in the Western Calendar are likely to be commemorating events of the Twentieth Century.

Double Tenth

Double Ten Day is the tenth of October, the tenth day of the tenth month, thus the name. It marks the anniversary of the start of the Revolution of 1911. In Taiwan this holiday is treated much like the American Fourth of July. In Taiwan the effort to promote national pride is on a grand scale. For the entire month of October, streets are decorated with flags, banners, and lights. On the tenth day, in the capital city of Taipei, an enormous parade marches through the city; it includes army troops, school bands, acrobats, dancers, and drill teams. Similar parades and demonstrations go on throughout Taiwan. October 31st is also a holiday, the birthday of Chiang Kai-shek.

May Day

May first is May Day. Though the holiday originated in Russia, the People's Republic of China have transformed the May Day celebrations into a Chinese holiday. Sports events, parades and demonstrations may be held on this Communist Labor day. It is celebrated internationally, and red flags can be seen waving all over the world.

October First

October first is considered Independence Day in the People's Republic of China. Parades and demonstrations fill the streets; and red flags are raised high, as the people take a holiday to commemorate the victory of the People's Liberation Army in 1949.

15 16 17

Customs

The strength of the Chinese family can never be underestimated. "Five generations under one roof" is the traditional image of a prosperous, or at any rate, healthy family. Within such a great range of ages the family members benefit from the wisdom of the elders, the strength of the young adults, and the joys of infants.

"The older one is, the more respected one is; the younger one is, the more adored."

Children

When a child is born it is considered one year old by Chinese reckoning. The proud father passes out eggs that are painted red rather than cigars. The birth is not celebrated further, however, until the infant is one month old. At that time a banquet is held to celebrate the baby's birth. Undoubtedly the child will then receive his first "red envelopes" which will contain good-luck money. ③

Young Chinese children are given much attention, affection, and freedom for the few years before school begins. Adults understand that "Life's pains will arrive soon enough". With school come resonsibility and discipline. Literacy and education are held in high esteem, not only because parents recognize that more education is likely to grant greater job opportunities in adult life, but because of the links to the past. Chinese heritage is so rich, and with the writing system being thousands of years old, literacy is almost held sacred. Calligraphy is a [18]

highly revered art form.

The predominant reasons for an education are to gain a good job. A prestigious job, or one that earms a good income, brings honor to the family name, not to mention comfort. Since an individual's resonsiblity to his family is never exhausted, industrious hard work is expected, and laziness is traditionally regarded as disrespectful to one's elders.

Marriage

Marriage celebrations are elaborate, and customarily great expense goes into the cost of the wedding feast. Wedding banquets nowadays often include the families of both the bride and the groom; whereas, formerly, wedding feasts were held in the home of the groom, marking the arrival of the new daughter-in-law.

In the past the groom's family sent a sedan-chair to the bride's home. The bride would be carried through the streets [19] back to the groom's home. This procession served to make it known publically that a proper marriage was taking place. The chair was enclosed and the bride could not be seen. The bride wore a bright red gown and a headdress with red veils. Not until she was led well inside the groom's home would the groom be allowed to lift her veils. In the old days when marriages were arranged this was usually the first time the couple met. Today couples are not strangers on their wedding days, though matchmakers still exist, and parental approval is desired. Also many Chinese brides wear the traditional red wedding gown, [20] although they do not wear the veiled headdresses.

Today in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Overseas Chinese communities the banquets are likely to be held in restaurants where [21] entire rooms are rented for the occasion. The restaurants will hang colorful banners outside announcing the wedding. Customarily the groom's family will greet the guests and a twelve course meal will ensue, each course symbolizing health,

wealth, or happiness. One Chinese name for the feast is "drink wine", and appropriately so, for throughout the course of the meal the groom and his family go from table to table toasting with the guests. (Grooms who hope to get through the night still standing, have been known to water down their own drinks). At some weddings the bride changes her gown more than once, for the display symbolizes prosperity. Many brides may also change into a formal western-style, white bridal gown.

The wedding party officially bound the couple in marriage traditionally; there was no governmental registration, nor was there any traditional religious ceremony. The present government of the People's Republic of China has tried to discourage lavish wedding parties, and to make registration with the government the only requirement; however the custom of the wedding feast appears to continue.

Customarily the wife moves in with her husbands family. In rural China this is still very common, andin many Chinese communities around the world, as it is economically convenient for all involved. However, in big cities, with industrialization, and with various job opportunities, young couples often are seen moving away from their home locations. Financially successful couples often find separate homes, but the family bond is still strong. The custom of sharing the home with ones parents also provided security for parents when they grew old. This tradition dies hard, regardless of old-age pensions and social security plans. The saying goes,"In the first three years of life, your parents protected and cared for you; it is only fitting that you repay them by caring for them in their old age.".

Funerals

A funeral may be even more extravagant than a marriage celebration. The funeral procession is led by a brass band or gong and cymbal players, or both. Paper offerings are carried by those following the band (refer to Ching Ming Festival). The coffin is carried with the family walking behind wearing white mourning clothes. A family can spend large sums of money honoring the deceased, Sometimes extra bands and additional mourners will be hired to increase the size of the funeral procession. The coffin is set up for the wake, during which the family stays up all night playing mah-jong and talking. The next day the band leads the procession to the gravesite. There the paper offerings will be burned. (22)

Customarily the gravesite must be chosen by a geomancer, for the dead must rest in a place of peace. Chinese tombstones resemble the back of an armchair, and larger ones form a semi-circle. Family gravesites may have one large semi-circular tombstone. Graves often have a photograph of the deceased affixed to the tombstone. [8] The custom is to dig up the body several years after the burial, at which time the bones are cleaned and placed in an urn. The urns are then moved to another site, perhaps high on a mountain. In Asia, land and wood are premiums, both coffin and gravesite can be used again for another.

In homes, incense and flowers are put at the family altar in worship of the deceased. [22] Once one has died ones photograph may be hung in the home. In the past the living would not

display their own photographs. However, this taboo is now less stringent than it once was.

Homes

The Chinese were named "wall-builders" centuries ago when villages and cities were always surrounded by walls. Individual homes would also have their own walls. The gateway of a home opened onto a courtyard. It was a superstition that a door must not open opposite another. Thus the line from a gate entrance had to be staggered from the doorway so that evil spirits could not easily enter a home. Family altars were traditionally placed opposite the main entrance at the center of the house. Today bright red altars are still seen inside doorways and shops.

In some Chinese households, members remove their street shoes upon entering the house. For guests this is by no means mandatory, in contrast to the Japanese custom, and slippers are not set out for visitors. The habit appears to be more prevalent in the warmer regions of the south, maybe simply because sandals and slippers are easier to slip on and off.

The Chinese sit on chairs, not on the floor, and beds are raised up also, not mats on the floor. The traditional bed (especially seen in the north) is a "kang", a clay structure which is built over a fire. By day it serves as a table, by night it is a warm bed. The average Chinese bed is hard by European standards; a straw mat is preferred as a mattress cover in the summer. A stuffed comforter is the winter blanket and a comfortable sheet made of terricloth, which is like a huge

towel, is popular in the summer months. The old style pillows look more like neck rests than pillows of the western style. Sometimes they are made of woven bamboo, or stuffed with beans but very firm, or made of lacquer. Rectangular in shape, they are about a foot long and four to five inches square.

Taking Meals

A meal begins with, "Let's eat!" and then everyone digs in. One does not have to wait for cues from the hostess. At a casual meal one ought not dawdle. Chopsticks is a homonym in Chinese for "fast sticks" and one could get left with rice only if one is too slow at reaching for main dishes. Each person has an individual bowl of rice and often a small plate on which to place the main course tidbits. The main course dishes are placed in the center of the table, and each person picks bite-size pieces out of the main dishes with his own chopsticks as the meal goes on. It is not polite to reach across someone else's chopsticks or to reach into a dish at the same time as someone else. It is proper to take the morsels from the sides of the (respective) dishes which are closest to you rather than stir around in the main dishes. Once a piece has been chosen, it ought not be returned to the serving dish. (10)

Some families never speak when they are eating. Food is considered far too important. However, such formalities are pre-empted according to the occassion, such as large social gatherings. Compliments to the cook are always welcome. Customarily a guest should ask for a second bowl of rice, otherwise the hosts would believe the guest did not like the meal. It is not obligatory to finish the second bowl, but the jesture of asking is a compliment. It would be wise for a guest to not eat the day prior to a dinner invitation, for undoubtably the hosts will prepare large amounts of food. "A guest will not return for a second visit if he is not fed well the first time.".

When one finishes a meal, one places his chopsticks across his rice bowl.

TEA

Teas are cultivated in China with the care and attention that is comparable to wine-making in France. There are numerous varieties of Chinese teas. As wine has its reds and whites, so tea has its reds and greens. (The English call red teas "black".) "Taking tea", or "Yum cha", in China unlike England, is done early in the day, approximately from 10:00 to 3:00 pm. It is a smorgasbord of taste delights with small sweet and salty pastries, served with tea, and followed by noodle or rice dishes. People go to teahouses for late breakfast, or snacks, or lunch.

When a guest arrives in a Chinese home, the hostess will customarily offer him a cup of tea (or "white tea" which is boiled water). It is a welcoming to the guest. A guest is not obliged to drink it, but ought not refuse it.

Miscellany

-When handing an item to another person, one uses both hands. One also receives items with both hands. To use one hand appears casual or flippant. (An elder need not use two hands with a child; however, a child would be very rude to not use two hands in exchanges with an elder.)

-Soup is served last in northern China, first in southern China, and during the meal in some central regions.

-Clapping after entertainment was introduced to China from Europe. In China, however, the entertainers will applaud the audience after taking their bows.

-If receiving a gift, it would be terribly embarassing to open the package in front of the giver, not to mention rude. (Amongst good friends this sort of thing is relaxed, of course.)

-Never give a clock as a present. The word clock in Chinese, "jung", has the same pronounciation as a funeral gift; it would signify the worst of omens.

-Oranges are a sign of wealth and prosperity. Especially on New Year's Day, but also on any special occasion, people give oranges as gifts. When new restaurants open, you may see a display of oranges and flowers in front of them.

Slides

[1] Small home with "dwei dz" or scrolls pasted around doorway. (in Hong Kong).

[2] "Gung hei fat choi!" Children receiving red envelopes. Note peach blossoms behind them.

[3] Poster of the Kitchen God and his consort.

[4] Lion Dance.

[5] Children playing with drum and Lion-head mask.

[6] Dragon Dance.

[7] Decorated pig offering.

[8] Gravesites; on left, paper money placed on top of tombstone, held down with stone.(Note photo affixed to tombstone below). On right, children praying to ancestors; note food offerings and incense.

[9] Dragon Boat Races.

[10] Dragon Boat.

[11] Example of offerings laid out to ancestors. Altar on left.

[12] Lanterns for sale, on display outside store. (Hong Kong).

[13] Dragon Dance.

[14] Lantern Festival (Victoria Park in Hong Kong).

[15] [16] [17] Elaborate demonstrations in People's Republic of China.

[18] Children at school, already exercising discipline.

[19] Sedan-chair carrying bride to groom's home. (Picture from Sung Dynasty Village in Hong Kong).

[20] Contemporary bride wearing traditional, red bridal gown (with groom and friends). (Hong Kong).

[21] Wedding announcements hung outside restaurant in Hong Kong.

[22] (Elaborate) Family altar in home in Taiwan.

[23] Example of traditional home, center of which is family altar. Note scrolls on each side of door, and ornate roof which is over the

center room with altar; certainly a wealthy family. (in Taiwan)

24 Poor homes as well have family altars at entrance ways. Red light is electric candle on altar. (Hong Kong).

Cultural Objects

(3) Red Envelopes

(14) (D) Lion Dance Record

(15) Couplets or "Dwei Dz"

(17) Lionhead Puppets

(19) Lantern

(20) Paper Lanterns

(21) Moon Festival Basket

(22) Paper Money and Offerings

(10) Chopsticks

(24) Paper model of a Chinese Village

23 New Year Papercut-style red cardboard decorations

Please note: These objects do not come with the slide-unit, but are available for loan to teachers in the Ann Arbor-Detroit-Lansing area.*

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